

Chapter 6

RECREATION

The Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area has three major recreational areas: Lake Okeechobee, the Okeechobee Waterway, and the Kissimmee River. Lake Okeechobee is the largest recreational resource of the region. The lake has one of the most productive freshwater sports fisheries in North America and is an important winter waterfowl observation and hunting area. The extensive littoral zone on the western, undiked side of the lake provides critical habitat for the lake's popular sport fishery. The associated waterways and shoreline provide a wide variety of water-based recreation activities for local residents and out-of-state visitors, including boating, picnicking, sightseeing, camping, swimming, hunting, airboating, hiking, biking, and horseback riding.

Lake Okeechobee experienced six years of inordinately high water levels during the mid-1990s. These high water levels have caused damage to the native plant populations in the lake and have the potential to threaten the fisheries. The Lake Okeechobee Recession was approved by the SFWMD Governing Board by resolution in 2000 was designed to bring Lake Okeechobee to a target level of 13 feet NGVD for a period of six to eight weeks in order for suspended sediments in the lake's water column to settle out allowing sunlight to reach seed beds in the lake's bottom. Although signs of new life in Lake Okeechobee were slower than expected, many areas showed recovery. The northern portion of the lake remains an area of concern.

The Okeechobee Waterway, which stretches 152 miles from Fort Myers to Stuart, links the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of Florida with the lake via the Caloosahatchee River and St. Lucie Canal. The waterway has been used for decades by the Kissimmee Boat-A-Cade in its oceangoing trips.

Phase 1 of the Kissimmee River Restoration Project is completed and has had an effect on recreational activities. Although lands acquired for this restoration effort have provided greater opportunities for users such as hiking, hunting, and camping, navigation of larger boats on the restored section of the river is limited and navigation through the entire length of river will be blocked intermittently during many phases of restoration construction.

The major challenge addressed by this chapter is to manage Lake Okeechobee in order to optimize opportunities for growth of native vegetation to enhance the health of the lake's fisheries. This challenge will be addressed by using the newly approved WSE regulation schedule for Lake Okeechobee and by working closely with other state and federal agencies to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, extended high water levels in the future.

A. GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

Goal 1: Attain recreational opportunities that meet public demand and are consistent with other SWIM goals

Objective 1: Develop and support recreational opportunities within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area to the maximum extent possible considering the environmental sensitivity and suitability of the area

Strategy 1: Assist communities along Lake Okeechobee in developing recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, boating, canoeing, bicycling, birding, sailing, ecotourism, and other related outdoor activities

Strategy 2: Continue recreational development of appropriate lands owned by the SFWMD and supporting development of other lands within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area as segments of the Florida National Scenic Trail

B. RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The SFWMD and USACE have published several pamphlets of recreational facilities in Lake Okeechobee and the Okeechobee Waterway, as well as SFWMD land management areas along the Kissimmee River. These have been combined to produce a comprehensive list of recreation sites and their respective activities/public uses in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area (**Table 6-1**). The recreation sites are listed by county, except for the 27 management areas listed under the Kissimmee River Land Management Areas, which include properties acquired by the District for the restoration of the Kissimmee River. In addition to these public recreation sites and land management areas, numerous private fish camps, marinas, boat tour, and sightseeing facilities are located near access points to the lake. Additional recreational information is available from federal and state agencies, chambers of commerce, tourism development councils, and the SFWMD's Okeechobee Service Center.

Table 6-1. Public recreation sites in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area

Recreation Site	Recreational Activities ^a							
	Boating	Fishing	Picnic	Camping	Hunting	Biking	Hiking	Horse Back
Martin County								
Port Mayaca Recreational Area	X	X	(X)			A	A	
Port Mayaca Wayside Park			X					
Chancey Bay Access Area	X	X	(X)			A	A	
Indiantown Marina	X		X	X				
DuPuis Reserve	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
St. Lucie Lock and Dam	X	X	X	X				
Phipps Martin County Park	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Okeechobee County								
Henry Creek Lock Access Area	X	X						
Nubbin Slough Access Area	X	X	X					
Taylor Creek Access Area	X	X				A	A	
Okeechobee (Lock 7/Wayside)	X	X	X			A	A	
C. Scott Driver, Jr. Recreation Area	X	X						
Okee-Tantie Recreation Area	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Glades County								
Buckhead Ridge	X	X						
Indian Prairie Canal Access Area	X	X	(X)	X		A	A	
Bare Beach Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Harney Pond Canal Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Fisheating Creek Access Area	X	X	X					
Nicodemus Slough	U	U	U				U	
Sportsman's Village Access Area	X	X	X					
Moore Haven West (Moore Haven Recreational Village)	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Moore Haven East (Alvin Ward Park)	X	X	X			A	A	
Ortona Lock and Dam (North)	X	X	X					
Ortona Lock and Dam (South)		X	X	X				
Hendry County								
Clewiston Recreation Area	X	X	X			A	A	
COE, Clewiston								
Port Labelle Marina	X							
Belle Hatchee Marina	X							
Barron Park			X					
Labelle Access Area	X		X					
Labelle Lions Park			X					
Lee County								
Alva Access Area	X							

a. Key

X = Activity allowed at site.

(X) = Activity proposed at site.

A = Access to Florida National Scenic Trail on Hoover Dike.

U = Uses will be allowed once the proposed construction contract is completed.

Table 6-1. Public recreation sites in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area

Recreation Site	Recreational Activities ^a							
	Boating	Fishing	Picnic	Camping	Hunting	Biking	Hiking	Horse Back
W.P. Franklin Lock and Dam North	X	X		X				
W.P. Franklin Lock and Dam South	X		X					
Palm Beach County								
John Stretch Park	X	X	X			A	A	
South Bay Access Area	X	X	X			A	A	
Belle Glade Recreation Area	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Rardin Park	X	X	X			A	A	
Bacom Point		X	X			A	A	
Pahokee Marina and Campground	X	X	X	X		A	A	
Canal Point Lions Club Park	X	X	X			A	A	
Kissimmee River Land Management Areas								
KICCO		X	X	X	X	X	X	
No Name Slough	X	X	X	X			X	
Boney Marsh	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Bluff Hammock I	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Bluff Hammock II	X	X	X	X			X	
Starvation Slough		X	X				X	
Oak Creek		X	X	X			X	
Hickory Hammock	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Turkey Hammock		X	X				X	
Cornwell Marsh East	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Cornwell Marsh West	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Micco Landing	X	X	X	X			X	
Chandler Slough - 1		X	X	X		X	X	
Chandler Slough - 2	X	X	X				X	
Pearce Homestead								
Seaboard Marsh North	X	X	X	X			X	
Seaboard Marsh South	X	X	X	X			X	
River Acres II		X						
Yates Marsh	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Telex Marsh	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Platt's Bluff	X	X	X	X			X	
Daughtry Cutoff	X	X	X	X			X	
Maple River	X	X	X	X			X	
70 N Marsh	X	X	X	X			X	
S-65E Impoundment	X	X	X	X	X		X	
M-2 Marsh (Part of Paradise Run)	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Mims Island (Part of Paradise Run)		X	X	X	X		X	

a. Key

X = Activity allowed at site.

(X) = Activity proposed at site.

A = Access to Florida National Scenic Trail on Hoover Dike.

U = Uses will be allowed once the proposed construction contract is completed.

C. SUMMARY OF RECREATION ISSUES

C1. Lake Okeechobee and Okeechobee Waterway

The *Lake Okeechobee and Okeechobee Waterway Master Plan* (USACE, 1986) identified factors influencing public use, including the existing conditions of the project's recreation resources and requirements needed to meet future demands. The main factor identified was a deficiency of supporting facilities at several areas heavily used for both boat and bank recreational fishing. Crowding at boat launching areas is exacerbated during the busy winter months and during times when the areas are also being used for waterfowl hunting. Also, additional launch ramps are needed to meet the increasing demands for access to the rim canal and Lake Okeechobee. Access to the lake is also affected by water levels and maintenance of boat trails (see **Chapter 7**, which addresses navigation). Other deficiencies were identified for campsites, hiking and bicycling trails, and picnicking facilities.

In 1996, recreation levels at Lake Okeechobee were estimated at 64,503,500 visitor hours (Miller, 1999) and fishing and boating pressure continues to increase, particularly in the bay areas and littoral zone, where recreational fishing is concentrated. Therefore, it is critical to maintain adequate recreation facilities and meet future projected needs.

Many impediments prevent the building of additional facilities. The USACE may not develop or enhance recreational facilities without a cost-sharing sponsor, except those justified to serve other project purposes or for public health and safety (USACE, 1986). Interviews with staff at the FWC reveal that a number of problems are encountered in building boat launch ramps. These include the FWC's priorities to repair over 200 existing ramps built throughout the state since 1960, the difficulties involved in meeting funding guidelines, and complications that arise when formal written agreements are required between multiple parties, including federal, state, local, and private interests.

C2. Kissimmee River

The *Environmental Restoration of the Kissimmee River Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement* (USACE, 1991) identifies impacts to recreation and navigation resulting from restoration of the Kissimmee River. While acquisition of lands along the Kissimmee River have created additional recreational opportunities, including extension of the Florida National Scenic Trail (see the **Florida National and Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trails** section below), impacts on general boating and recreational boating are anticipated as construction of the river restoration project is completed. Larger houseboats and other deep draft vessels are not able to navigate within the restored reaches of the river, and water sports, such as water skiing, will be limited to those reaches not included in restoration. This loss will be offset in part by opportunities for canoeists and fishermen using smaller boats. Fishing success on the restored river is expected to increase over the long term. Navigation issues arising from the Kissimmee River Restoration Project are further discussed in **Chapter 7**.

D. ONGOING ACTIVITIES

D1. Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance

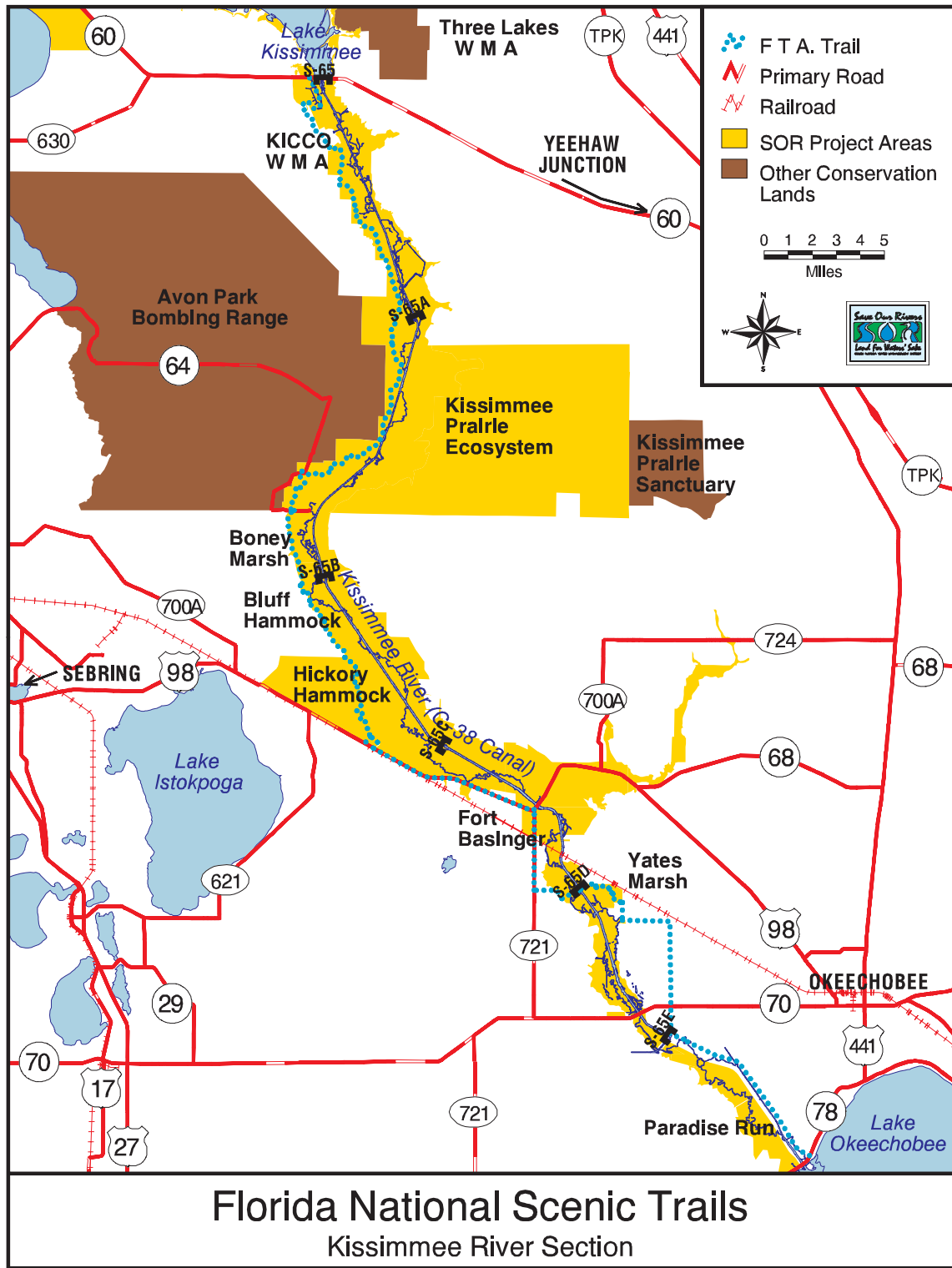
In recognition of the ecotourism potential of the region, the Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance was formed in 1993 to promote a regional identity focusing on the natural scenic beauty and cultural heritage of the area. The Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance, which is an arm of the Florida Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative, has been active in promoting hiking and bicycling around the Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail and other areas of the Florida National Scenic Trail. The alliance recently published a tourism pamphlet for the eight-county region served by the group.

The District participated in regional detailed design workshops that provided a forum for communities around Lake Okeechobee to develop master plans that share a common vision. This was a joint effort by the District, local governments, regional planning councils, and groups such as Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance and the Conservation Fund. The concept was to ensure that community master plans are integrated with regional economic and environmental goals. Recreational development was an important component of these workshops.

Annual events on the Herbert Hoover Dike include the Big-O-Go and Big-O-Hike sponsored by the Greater Lake Okeechobee Tourism Alliance and the FTA (FTA). Trail organizers from both groups have been a catalyst for trail development and are instrumental in promoting tourism in the region. The Big-O-Go is a 120-mile, four-day mountain bike marathon that was first held in November 1994. Due to its success and the success of the Big-O-Hike, a nine-day hiking event that has taken place every November since 1992, these events are anticipated to draw more participants in coming years. Both events promote economic growth to the region and have gained the cooperation and enthusiasm of communities around the lake.

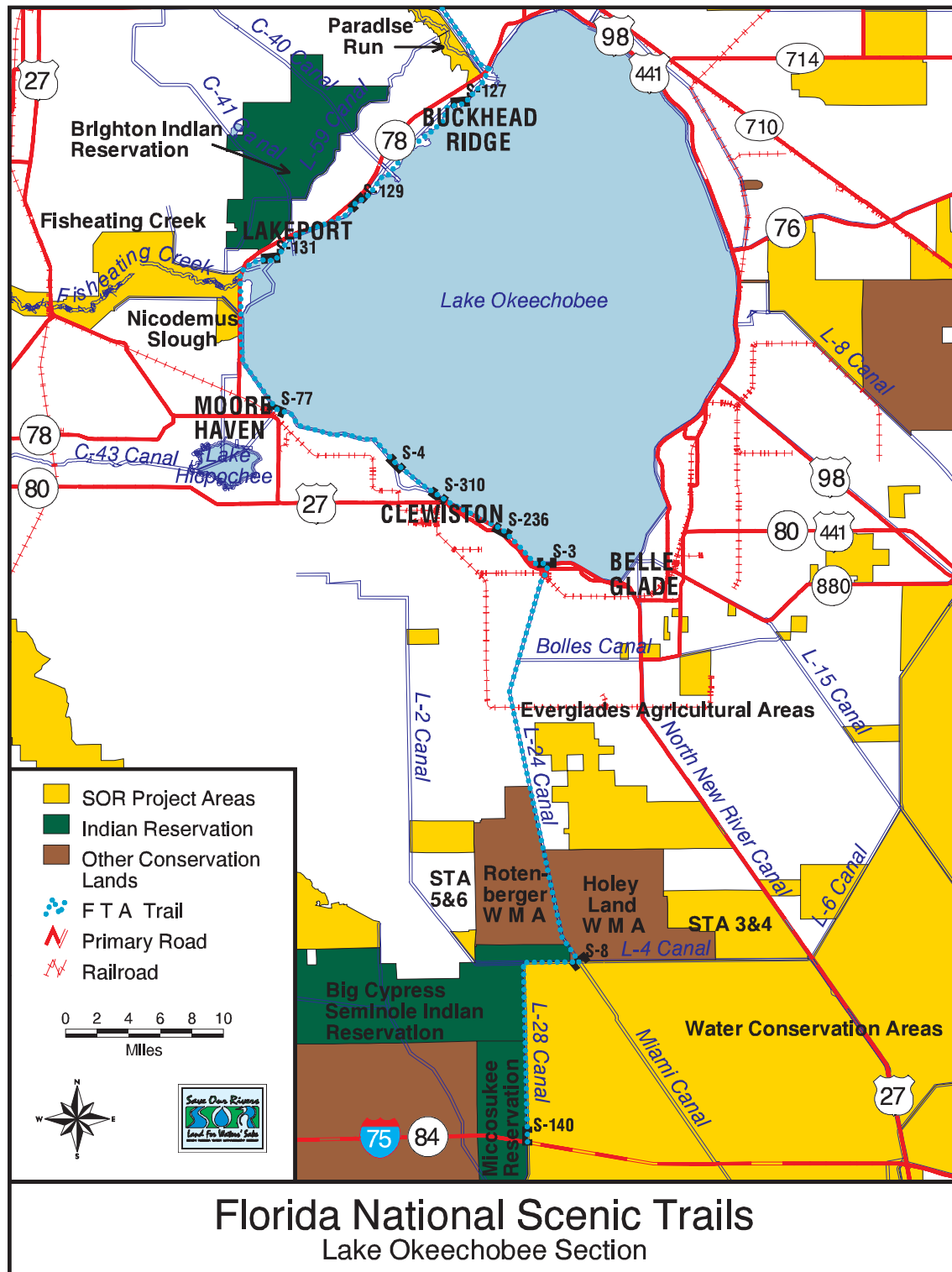
D2. Florida National and Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trails

The Florida National Scenic Trail is one of eight national scenic trails in the country. When completed, the trail will meander 1,300 miles through Florida from the Gulf Island Seashore of the Panhandle to the Big Cypress National Preserve. Development and maintenance of the Florida National Scenic Trail is being led by the FTA in cooperation with numerous public and private agencies, organizations, and individuals. Portions of the trail are within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning area (**Figures 6-1 and 6-2**). The trail has and will continue to provide new recreational opportunities along the Kissimmee River and around Lake Okeechobee. Potential recreational opportunities include fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, bicycling, canoeing, and birding. Additional opportunities include connecting the trail to surrounding communities and providing equestrian access in limited areas.



Drawn by P.S.Ellis - 10/14/98

Figure 6-1. The Kissimmee River section of the Florida National Scenic Trail (WMA = Wildlife Management Area; FTA = Florida Trail Association; SOR = Save Our Rivers)



Drawn by P.S.Ellis - 10/15/98

Figure 6-2. The Lake Okeechobee section of the Florida National Scenic Trail
(WMA = Wildlife Management Area; FTA = Florida Trail Association; SOR = Save Our Rivers)

Once they reach the Hoover Dike at Clewiston, hikers heading north from Big Cypress have the choice of walking around the east or west sides of Lake Okeechobee. Scenic views of the lake and the adjacent agricultural lands are afforded from the trail at Clewiston, Lake Harbor, South Bay, Pahokee, and on Torrey Island west of Belle Glade.

D3. Florida Cracker Trail

The Florida Cracker Trail is a historic east-west route that Florida cattlemen followed each spring until the 1930s. The trail passes through Manatee, Hardee, Highlands, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie Counties. Each year since 1988, the historical return trip of the cattle drive has been reenacted. The Florida Legislature named and recognized the Florida Cracker Trail in 1986, and the trail is officially designated on FDOT maps.

D4. Fishing Tournaments

The FWC estimates over 250,000 angler hours are dedicated to fishing tournaments on Lake Okeechobee annually. This accounts for 25 percent of all statewide tournament activity. Based on their reservation numbers, Okee-Tantie Park in Okeechobee hosted 50 tournaments in 1994. Other popular tournament sites are Roland Martin's Marina, Anglers Inn, Harney Pond, the Indian Prairie Canal, and the city ramps in Clewiston, Moore Haven, Lakeport, and Belle Glade. Combined, these sites probably host the same number of tournaments as Okee-Tantie.

D5. Boating Events

The Kissimmee Boat-A-Cade, formed in 1947, uses the Kissimmee Waterway for three annual boating trips from the city of Kissimmee through Lake Okeechobee. From Lake Okeechobee, the boats proceed to either the east or west coast through the Okeechobee Waterway, depending upon their destination. A total of about 300 boats participate annually in the Kissimmee Boat-A-Cade. Boat sizes range from 18 to 40 feet. In the past, the Boat-A-Cade has also made trips to the Florida Keys and Charleston, South Carolina.

